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AUTHOR Barger, Josephine C.; Barger, Robert N.
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ABSTRACT

College admission and academic advising in Ireland are considered, with background information about the Irish educational system and comparisons to the U.S. system provided. University students in Ireland do not have the benefits of a centralized professional advisement system, and there appear to be no plans or financial means for initiating any such program. At the post-primary (second level) of Irish education, 3 years of study lead to the Intermediate Certificate examination. Study can be college preparatory, vocational, or comprehensive, a combination of college preparatory and vocational. An additional 2 or 3 years of coursework leads to the Leaving Certificate examination. Points on this examination are assigned for subjects tested, and the total points received by the student determine acceptance for third level education as well as the course of study to which the student will be assigned from among the student's preferences. The university program usually requires 3 years for an arts degree and 4 years for a science degree. There is much competition for limited number of places in courses that are considered prestigious and likely to lead to jobs. Students who change their minds about their course of study after August 1 lose as much as a year of school and financial aid. (SW)

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ACCESS AND ADVISEMENT IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION: AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

by

Josephine C. Barger
Academic Advisor
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois 61920
and Visiting Researcher
The National University of Ireland
University College, Cork

and

Robert N. Barger
Professor of Education
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois 61920
and Visiting Professor
The National University of Ireland
University College, Cork

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ACCESS AND ADVISEMENT IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION: AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

How do people get into college in Ireland? How do they select their majors? What kind of academic advice do they receive, and from whom do they receive it? We will address these questions in the pages that follow. But first, we will provide some background on the Irish educational system.

Ireland is a very small country. Geographically, it is about half the size of the state of Illinois. While the United States has slightly more than 2000 four year colleges and universities, Ireland has only four campuses offering university-level education (three of these are campuses of the National University of Ireland at Cork, Dublin, and Galway, while the other is Trinity College--the only college of the University of Dublin). Ireland also has a number of other institutions which offer third-level education, i.e., regional technical colleges, national institutes of higher education, teacher training colleges for primary school (elementary) teachers and the national council for educational awards.

The Irish and American educational systems are not structured in precisely the same fashion. They each, however, have three distinct levels. At the primary level, the Irish have two (and sometimes three) years of infant class, followed by classes one through six of primary school. In the United States, the primary level usually

consists of kindergarten through eighth grade with some variations, i.e., middle school and junior high school. At the post-primary (second level), the Irish have three types of schools: 1) secondary (college preparatory), 2) vocational, and 3) comprehensive (a combination of the college preparatory and the vocational). Irish second level education consists of three years of study leading up to the Intermediate Certificate examination. This is followed by an additional two years (sometimes three years) of course-work leading up to the Leaving Certificate examination.

In the United States the usual second level consists of four years leading up to the High School Diploma which is conferred if required coursework is successfully completed. There are no Intermediate or Leaving Certification examinations administered in the United States. The ACT [American College Test] or SAT [Scholastic Appitude Test] are taken by American students voluntarily and only if a college or university requires one or the other for admission purposes.

The duration of time spent at third level institutions in Ireland varies according to "course" requirements and the institution. In Ireland, the university program usually requires three years for an Arts degree and four years for a Science Degree. It should be noted that second level teachers are ordinarily trained at one of the Universities in a Higher Diploma program which is a one year "course" taken after a student receives an Arts Degree or a Science Degree. Primary school teachers are trained at third level teacher training colleges during a three year degree "course." These institutions are

very selective, with special entrance examinations and requirements. A discussion of these is not within the scope of this paper. In the United States, baccalaureate degrees generally require four years of study and may include teacher training programs for those who choose to teach at the elementary or secondary level.

Because the Leaving Certificate examination plays such an important role in acceptance for third level education in Ireland, both teachers and students seem preoccupied with the teaching and learning of facts pertinent to examination questions. Not only teachers and students we interviewed, but parents as well, expressed concern for the psychological pressures involved with this process in the educational system.

It is essential to understand that Leaving Certificate examination points are assigned for certain subjects tested. It is the precise sum total points received by the student on this examination that will determine whether or not he/she will be accepted for third level education, and if accepted, to what "course" from among his/her preferences the student will be assigned.

The third level institutions provide a variety of degree "courses", some 104 in all. ("Courses" in Ireland would be comparable in the United States to a 4 year curriculum at a College/University.) However, to qualify for a place at a University in Ireland prospective students must file an application in February through the Central Applications Office (CAO) and hope that their

Leaving Certificate examination in June will yield enough points in their list of preferential "courses" to be offered a place in third level education.

Because not all "courses" are considered to have prestigious faculties and job potentials, there is a great deal of competition for limited numbers of seats in "courses" which are considered to be prestigious and in "courses" where economic forecasters predict jobs will be available when "courses" are completed. With the current unemployment rates nearing 20%, the concern for jobs after graduation is quite genuine. The CAO processes approximately 25,000 applications for about 10,000 places in these 104 "courses." The CAO system is simple and efficient for very talented students who have definite career choices made before they leave the second level. The system allows the student to apply for up to ten "courses" in order of preference at the universities offering the preferred "courses." Because of increasing competition, point levels for "courses" may increase. Inversely, decreasing competition may cause point levels for "courses" to decrease.

When the Leaving Certificate examinations are completed in June and results are sent to the CAO, a computer lists all eligible applicants for every "course" in order of points. The computer then rank-orders each applicant's choice. If all places for an applicant's first choice are full, the computer moves on to that applicant's second choice and so on. The CAO computer is programmed to offer each applicant the highest preference "course" to which

he/she is entitled.

In the event that vacancies occur because some applicants withdraw, other applicants can compete for these places if they had listed these as higher preferences than the "course" offered to them. The rule states that while applicants can move upward in order of preference if places become available, they will not be considered for a place in a "course" which is a lower preference than the one already offered.

If an applicant changes his/her mind after February 1, the CAO provides for a change of mind process up to August 1, but always a "course" of lower preference than the one first offered.

Once the admission process is accomplished, a student's choice of "course" is so definitive that any "course" decision change after August 1 would mean that the student must begin the whole CAO application process over and lose as much as a year of education and probably most financial aid received. Consequently, very young students, often with little specific knowledge of careers and courses chosen, are making life-long decisions that may or may not be good for them.

Once the student enrolls in classes (this is merely a process of paying fees in the University Registrar's Office for classes required each year), he/she attends lectures and meets with tutors in the Department offering the assigned classes for each "course." At this

point any academic advisement requested or needed is the sole responsibility of the lecturer or tutor, as there are no professionally trained academic advisors employed or envisioned as a necessary conponent of third level education by administrators. A January 29, 1987, letter to the editor of the IRISH TIMES by a student adroitly expresses a need for some academic advisement of a professional nature at the third level:

> From the point of view of a student about to embark on the daunting task of wading through the stressful times leading up to, during, and after the Leaving Certificate exams, university seems like a "sanctuary"--a light at the end of the tunnel, which, upon reached, will be the end of all his/her problems. All the hype, peer pressure and advice from people who are not qualified to advise at all, seem to encourage the myth that the Leaving Certificate is the hardest set of exams that one will ever do. Certainly, from my own recent experiences, it was only so due to that same pressure. The examinations themselves, for someone capable and prepared to do the associated work, pose minimal problems in comparison to the stress generated during the final year right up to the first, and subsequent, round of CAO offers.
>
> This, and the huge differences between post-primary and tertiary education, can very easily

> lead to a type of culture shock due to the difficulties of adjusting to university life. Instead of being "spoon fed" everything, the onus is now on the student to do the work and to find out what university life has to offer. It is very difficult for someone to adjust to a large and frequently impersonal campus. Often this leads to students changing faculties after one year, failing their first year or, at worst, leaving university without having really experienced it.
>
> Not enough is done by schools or universities to educate the student as to what he/she is getting into.... It is my feeling that if there was more said about life after Leaving Cert many of the problems I have outlined above could be avoided (Crossen, 1987).

As far as lecturers or tutors giving academic advice, there is a similar attitude observable among American and Irish instructors who have responsibility for advisement. This is exemplified in the comment, "I said that I was available and no one came to my office." This is quite understandable in Ireland when one observes the very reserved, reticent, and respectful attitude Irish students have toward University lecturers. While attending lectures at University College, Cork, we observed that students rarely, if ever, were encouraged to participate or to question any material presented. Consequently, Irish students seem to avoid establishing much rapport

with their lecturers.

Most universities in Ireland employ personnel in a Careers and Appointments Offices and counselors in a Counseling Office. The defined role of the former would be more closely aligned with Placement Office personnel in the United States and the latter with clinical psychologists at American universities. However, after interviewing personnel at University College, Cork, in both of these offices, it was clear that their defined role was often, in practice, extended to include academic advisement. While Ireland has nothing comparable to the American concept of centralized academic advisement, the persons interviewed at University College, Cork, expressed an urgent need for this not only at the third level, but at the second level as well, because of the highly structured Leaving Certificate examination program.

There are strengths in third level education in Ireland which are responsible for the well deserved reputation Irish education enjoys around the world. The graduates of the Universities throughout Ireland are of high calibre, respected in their fields and are, consequently, recruited worldwide. While the pressures to teach and learn for Leaving Certificate examination points at the second level may be questionable, and the "course" choices made too prematurely for third level education, the academic achievement of those accepted for third level education is truly superior. This is evident from the proportion of high scores received by students on the Leaving Certificate examinations. In America, accessibility to higher

education is so much greater due to the "buyers' market" for college age students, that the end result has been less selectivity at some universities. The academic competition for many graduates from American universities doesn't really begin until these students graduate from universities and pursue positions in their careers. Every Irish student has the opportunity to compete for limited spaces available at the universities in Ireland, but with the fierce competition already overcome at the secondary level, students accepted for third level "courses" are apt to be better prepared academically for University lectures than many American students entering universities in the United States.

The necessity for making early decisions regarding "courses" and careers in Irish universities may be difficult at the time, but doing so is a maturing process which may prove beneficial to a student later in life. This maturing can be very helpful considering that many of the Irish university graduates are forced to leave their homeland for other countries in order to get their first experience in their chosen career. While early decisions may benefit some, they may, conversely, be detrimental for those students American educators call "late bloomers." There seems to be little accommodation for these students in the Irish system.

A loss of valuable time and monetary aid is imminent when a student changes his/her mind after beginning a third level "course" in Ireland. It is quite detrimental to a student who starts a "course" and then discovers he/she dislikes the subject matter,

cannot comprehend the material or has not made a wise lifelong career decision. Probably the greatest weakness we observed was that academic "courses" and careers are most often determined by Leaving Certification examination scores. To base such decisions on one test is incredible when the test environment, the student's physical and psychological health on test day, and the test examiner are all variables which might adversely affect the scores received on the test. It appears that a young person's opportunity for third level education and a professional career for the future are too irrevocably determined by one test.

In conclusion, let it suffice to say that university students in Ireland do not have the benefits of a centralized professional advisement program. In spite of the expressed need for some advisement program at University College, Cork, by each person interviewed in the Careers and Appointments Office and the Counseling Office as well as by the students interviewed, there are no plans or financial means available for initiating any such program that would help students make a less-pressurized and more rational transition from second to third level education in the universities of Ireland.

REFERENCE

Crossen, Francis. (1987, January 29). The Irish Times. Dublin, Republic of Ireland.